

Greenville Urban Area 2050 Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP)

Resident Feedback

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Introduction

While the *Draft 2050 MTP* has excellent information and seems to accurately reflect community needs and desires, the solutions proposed in many areas will fail to meet the stated objectives. The primary solution to congestion and safety in the Greenville Urban Area (GUA) is to widen already congested roads or “enhance” them to be more like highways. In contrast, while bike and pedestrian infrastructure is a top priority for the public, it is treated with the scrutiny of a risky investment to be used by lower income or driving-restricted people. Finally, any mention of micro mobility is mentioned in terms of “private investment,” completely disconnecting it from public development and the infrastructure it would use: bike networks. This Draft Plan is full of good data and shiny maps, but shows no forward thinking or real synthesis with respect to creating a city that’s livable, walkable, and desirable for anyone but car drivers. At the end of this document, I will list some recommendations that tie everything together.

“Improving” Congestion

Many of the roads in the GUA are congested and are predicted to grow more so over the next 25 years. This is accurate and virtually all residents of the GUA would agree that the primary arterial roads are unpleasant to use at best. The proposed solutions to address this congestion are primarily, in plain English, to:

1. Widen the roads (page 44 - “Congestion & Mobility”), and
2. Make the roads more like highways (page 44 - “Access Management & Operation”)

These will not improve congestion.

First, roughly half of the roads in this study are proposed to be widened. This is to address “congestion or safety concerns.” How does widening a road make it safer? Safer for whom? I’m not a traffic engineer, but I am college educated and have the ability to research; it took me less than a minute to find mountains of research that show the opposite is true, especially for

pedestrians. Isn't safety one of the public's top priorities? Even if widening a congested road makes it marginally safer for cars (it doesn't), it makes it all the more less safe for pedestrians and cyclists. Consider the section of Greenville Blvd from Memorial to Charles, one of the most congested sections of road in the city. It goes from a 5 lane undivided highway on the Memorial side, to an 8 lane divided road at Evans, back to a 5 lane undivided highway at Charles. Have a go at crossing Greenville Blvd at Evans on foot: you'd have to cross almost a football field in length with no sidewalk or crosswalk, not to mention Evans at this intersection is also a 6 lane road. If widening was supposed to relieve congestion and make it safer, who would honestly say that the various widening projects on these roads over the years have actually met that goal? From the proposed plan, it looks like we're aiming to make Old Tar a copy of Greenville Blvd.

Widening roads doesn't make them safer, but let's talk now about congestion. Widening roads doesn't relieve congestion in the long term. Again, there's mountains of research that indicate that widening roads causes an induction of trips over time that wouldn't have been there otherwise. A widened road *would* relieve congestion if and only if the amount of trips *remained statistically constant*. The reality is the opposite, as we've seen with Greenville Blvd and others, that a newly widened road attracts traffic from other areas and after a year or two will be as congested (if not more so) as before. The real end result of widening the roads is more cars and more distance for pedestrians to cross. This fails to address both goals of congestion relief and safety. A more honest goal would be to "increase vehicular throughput" instead of "relieve congestion & safety."

The solution for the other half of roads in the city are proposed by the Plan to "restrict turns & add medians" to "enhance mobility & safety." Again, mobility and safety for whom? The clear answer is enhanced mobility for cars. My question: does this include a reduction in speed limits on these corridors? If not, this plan is encouraging more car trips at faster speeds by making the roads more "mobile", flying in the face against the goal for safety. Not only does this make cars less safe, it makes pedestrians and cyclists orders of magnitude less safe, especially considering that the majority of these roads have minimal sidewalks & cycle infrastructure. This Plan ultimately reflects an old-fashioned and debunked approach to improving transportation, will fail in its goal, and practically ignores the needs and desires of the public.

Multimodal Transport - an afterthought

Consider the great cities that tourists flock to around the world: Montreal, Paris, London, Rome, Barcelona, Tokyo, Beijing, Amsterdam, Washington, New York, Chicago, Charleston, Savannah...one of the key things that make these cities desirable is their human-scale development and freedom to not need a car. Before any protest that these are “huge cities,” consider that the majority of these places have mid-dense / suburban neighborhoods like anywhere else, but have an entirely different character in how you get around it. There’s a wealth of bus lines with high frequency, light rail on some occasions, an abundance of protected bike infrastructure, complete streets, and pedestrian networks, with roads maintaining a modest size and use. These places prioritize humans, not cars. Furthermore, there’s a wealth of neighborhoods and areas in US cities from coast to coast that have a transportation network like these that are used and cherished. This Plan seems to address Multimodal transport as an afterthought, perhaps even begrudgingly so. I will just address the proposals for cycling.

The Plan recommends appropriate solutions for building the bike network, except for shared on-street lanes. This is not an appropriate solution when added into the mix of wider and faster roads; very few people would bike an 8 lane road moving at 50mph when our traffic fatalities are unnecessarily high already. Nevertheless, I’m more concerned with the seemingly dismissive tone taken towards the bike network. Hear me out.

Yes, this Plan addresses and recommends improvements in bike infrastructure. This is not something that should be applauded, especially given the years of community feedback locally and nationwide towards a better way of transport. It's the bare minimum to include a section on bikes. Aside from this, my first issue is the reductive classification of User Types (page 58). The Plan identifies two types of bicycle users:

1. Utilitarian - People without access to or the ability to operate a vehicle who take non-discretionary trips to work, school, the grocery store, or home.
2. Recreational - People who want an active, healthy lifestyle regardless of their access to a vehicle.

To summarize the types of bike users this Plan envisions, they are: the disabled, people without a license (children or convicts), people who can't afford a car, or some people interested in exercise. This is wildly reductive, represents only a portion of our population, and is possibly, unintentionally, discriminatory. It assumes that people who aren't part of these groups will not choose to cycle. There are plenty of people that would cycle to work or school if it was safe and feasible to do so, but it's not. I used to live near Arlington in the heart of the city; I'm an advanced cyclist and there were many sections of my commute that made me nervous for my safety. Furthermore, every cyclist can tell stories of disrespectful and retaliatory treatment from drivers while using the road. I didn't ride for exercise and I had a car, and there are many like me.

This Plan identifies that a high priority of the public wants a good bike network, yet doesn't realize that many of the respondents don't fall into the two users defined by this Plan. This Plan doesn't acknowledge that a third user could (and does exist); people who would rather not use a car, people who have non-discretionary trips but want the freedom to choose. Cars are ridiculously expensive, dangerous, and cause noise and air pollution. Some people want the freedom to choose how they get around, and the GUA doesn't give that freedom. There is only one feasible choice; drive a car. As a result, this Plan ultimately focuses (and will work towards if no true and meaningful change is made) on increasing car throughput. This Plan doesn't even consider for a sentence that a solution to congestion could be to get people *out of cars*, especially the ones that *don't want to drive a car*. Bike networks are the true "build it and they will come". In fact, the same can be said about induced demand for bike networks: if there was a protected multi use path from Pitt Community College to ECU, it would be used constantly by cyclists and pedestrians alike.

Have a look around Greenville; there are plenty of people attempting to cycle on dangerous roads. To conclude that bike networks are a low priority because of low ridership when, (1) the public wants it, but (2) it's unsafe and infeasible to do so is a lapse of critical analysis. That would be like saying, "People don't like Rolls Royce's because very few people drive them." People don't drive them because the environment doesn't promote that activity (in this case, the cost is too high). For our bike network, the safety and convenience cost is too high to choose to

cycle over driving, and therefore we are not truly free to do so. Instead the majority of people are forced to pay a high fiscal cost to get around, while increasing the safety and convenience cost of people who still choose to cycle or walk.

I want to be clear that rethinking and truly prioritizing the bike network doesn't mean forcing people not to drive. On the contrary, every model city of bike and pedestrian infrastructure still has cars. The key is building a city that promotes freedom, in this case, freedom of movement. The wonderful thing about prioritizing safe and widespread bike/ped infrastructure is there are virtually no negative knock-on effects, only positive. Once people begin to use these systems, more people will use them. This will mean less car trips, and overtime will relieve congestion. It will be easier and more accessible for those that do want to cycle or walk for health reasons. It will also encourage a more equitable city for everyone, regardless of their personal ability or inability to drive a car. Furthermore, the more conscious people are of alternatives to driving, and with increasing space on the road, the more people would choose to ride the GREAT system (if, of course, the frequency was higher...another topic).

Next, I want to address the 4 E's of Bicycle Planning. I looked up this in other sources and noticed that this Plan added an "Economic" section. Why is this included? Is the same scrutiny given to widening Old Tar? What return on investment does widening that road give to the community? Where is the increased tax revenue from a widened road? I understand that the prevailing balance book practice for a city is to include a road as an asset; how is a widened road, especially given the effects listed previously, an asset? It increases congestion, decreases safety, and requires even more city budget allocation to maintain than before. I find it fascinating that the Plan is concerned with "return on investment" when the costs for just maintaining the roads we have are orders of magnitude greater than any bike infrastructure. Was not one section of users defined in this Plan as disabled, young, restricted, or poor? Where is the possible return on investment from that group of disadvantaged people? "Return on investment" seems to be a bad faith criterion for building the bike network. And yet, there *are* tangible returns on building out this infrastructure, but only if they're actually built, safe, continuous, easy to access, and walking hand in hand with amenities and better land zoning. Using the term "return on investment" to

deprioritize the bike network seems to be a disappointing attempt to avoid implementing it altogether. In fact, the more I read it, I have comments on each point:

1. Economics - already mentioned
2. Education - most people know how to ride a bike, it's the network that's unsafe
3. Encouragement - build it and people will use it
4. Enforcement - build protected multi use paths.
5. Engineering - virtually no cyclist wants on-road facilities
6. Equity - the identified users are not comprehensive
7. Evaluation - good, but really it will always be about making them safer to use

Micro-mobility is Multimodal

My final thought is the comment on micro-mobility on page 64. It seems like the Plan has a poor grasp of the real nature of micro-mobility. E-scooters and e-bikes are of the same class and scale as the bike / ped network described earlier, with similar speeds to standard cycling. They're just another tool in the multimodal transport network, not a separate entity relegated to the private sector. They're not on the horizon, they're here. I know people with electric scooters and Aventon e-bikes that hesitate to use them for the reasons above. It seems that this Plan does not take a holistic synthesis of creating a diverse, rich, and freeing transportation system for the GUA.

Recommendations

Please do not take this feedback as accusatory or attacking; I've been told my writing style can be a bit edged. My aim was purely to address the arguments and statements in the Plan. I'm passionate about living in a place that's welcoming and freeing, like the many cities around the world, and would love to be proud to invite people to visit here. Unfortunately, I'm not at that point yet. Yet, there are certainly the stirrings of some good planning and building (like the Greenway) that show what could be if we really dug down and committed to it. All this being said, here are my recommendations:

1. Don't widen the roads; instead, coordinate the stop lights.
2. Don't make the roads faster; make them slower.
3. Redesign roads to promote human scale movement and development
4. Make a bold decision to prioritize bike / ped infrastructure and build it as soon as possible.
5. Consider increasing bus service to allow for 5-10 min frequency per stop. Build it and we'll use it.
6. Look into Strong Towns, an organization committed to encouraging resilient and thriving cities through better planning and transportation